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ABSTRACT

Quality teacher education programs provide candidates with many early field experiences in diverse settings. This Digest examines complexities and challenges of early field experiences, noting the nature and degree of early field experiences within teacher education programs. Through field experiences, teacher candidates observe and work with real students, teachers, and curricula in natural settings. Field experiences prior to student teaching are called early field experiences. The most prevalent field experience until the early 1980s was student teaching. Within recent years, early field experiences have become more common. Student teachers need careful guidance and mediation to help them focus on critical aspects of classroom teaching and interactions and interpret what they see in order to benefit from field experiences. The establishment of a Professional Development School greatly facilitates the delivery of early field experiences, though it is highly time- and labor-intensive. Teacher preparation programs are providing substantial amounts of early field experiences in varied settings. A 1997 survey examined field experiences nationwide and found that most teacher candidates first engaged in field experiences before their junior year. They spent a substantial number of hours engaged in early field experiences (particularly at the elementary level) in various schools and classrooms. In most programs, university supervisors provided some degree of on-site supervision. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more and earlier field experiences results in better prepared teachers. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Early Field Experiences in Teacher Education

Leslie Huling

Prior to the 1980s, the dominant mode of teacher preparation in this country consisted of course work on a university campus followed by one semester of student teaching. Today, quality teacher preparation programs provide candidates with a wide variety of early field experiences in a variety of settings to lay the foundation for and to supplement the capstone or culminating field experience of student teaching. This Digest briefly examines some of the complexities and challenges related to early field experiences and shares findings about the nature and degree of early field experiences occurring in the nation's teacher preparation programs.

What Are Field Experiences?

Field experiences in teacher preparation are in a sense like the experiences provided to medical students in the active participatory roles of internships and residencies. Through field experiences, teacher candidates observe and work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings (i.e., PK-12 schools). Field experiences are typically distinguished from clinical experiences, which occur in more tightly controlled educational settings (i.e. clinics, laboratory schools, etc.). The culminating or capstone field experience in teacher preparation is typically student teaching in which the candidate gradually assumes total teaching responsibility under the joint supervision of a cooperating teacher, who is the teacher of record, and a university supervisor. Field experiences prior to the student teaching experience are commonly referred to as early field experiences.

A Historical Look at Field Experiences in Teacher Preparation

The rationale for field experience in teacher preparation is grounded in the work of John Dewey (1904; 1938) who spearheaded the progressive movement in the 1930s and emphasized learner-centered instruction. He was a strong advocate for the experiential training of teachers. Dewey viewed the teacher as learner, and thus the need for that learner to be provided experiences for constructing his or her own learning.

In spite of the visionary thinking of Dewey, until the early 1980s, the most prevalent field experience provided to teacher candidates was simply student teaching. Early field experiences, if they were provided at all, typically consisted of candidates being sent to observe in schools and classrooms. While these early attempts to provide field experiences for teacher candidates were clearly a step in the right direction, the experiences were often fragmented and lacking in coherence (Smith, 1992).

Within the past two decades, a number of national reports have stressed the need for major improvements in the preparation of teachers as a foundation for other educational reform efforts. The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986), the Holmes Group (1986), the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (1996), and others (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Goodlad, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1997) have recommended that future teachers have more rigorous preparation and more authentic experiences to enable them to cope with the increasing complexity, challenges, and diversity of current schools and classrooms. What has been advocated is a more holistic conceptualization of the preservice teacher experience and increased collaboration between universities and public schools (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

A Glimpse of the Complexities Surrounding Field Experiences

How and what teacher candidates learn from early field experiences are questions mired in complexity. Just as the typical person doesn't learn much about ice skating from watching the Olympics or performing heart surgery from observing a heart operation, sending teacher candidates to observe in schools doesn't result in the type of substantive learning needed to become a successful teacher. Careful guidance and mediation to help candidates focus on critical aspects of classroom teaching and interactions and to interpret what they see is necessary for candidates to benefit from field experiences. For example, professors can present candidates with a variety of classroom management strategies and then have them participate in classrooms and record the strategies they observe and the effects these strategies have on student behavior and performance. Following this experience, professors can debrief with candidates about what they observed and the implications of these experiences related to their own teaching and classroom management.

In a very real sense, the goal of the teacher preparation program is to provide the teacher candidate with the experiences necessary to build the complex schema required to be an effective classroom facilitator of teaching and learning. In addition to observing, these field experiences would include, but not be limited to, tutoring individual and small groups of students, preparing instructional materials, grading student work, and supervising students at assemblies and on field trips.

The difficulty of providing quality field experiences is increased when sheer numbers make it difficult to place each candidate with an outstanding teacher who can model the type of learner-centered instruction advocated by most teacher preparation programs. Also, it is important to provide cooperating teachers with formal preparation for working with teacher candidates and supporting their learning, but frequently there is little time and few resources available for this training (Slick, 1995). Teacher educators are faced with the perplexing dilemma of balancing the need to provide candidates with early field experiences in a variety of settings with the need to allow candidates time to become familiar enough with a setting to make it feasible for them to do more than simply observe.

Some teacher preparation programs have attempted to address these various complexities by delivering field-based programs on-site in schools, or by field-basing specific faculty members who deliver certain portions of the teacher preparation program in collaboration with public school educators. These arrangements most often occur in professional development schools (PDS), which have collaborative teacher preparation as one of the primary purposes. While the establishment of a PDS greatly facilitates the delivery of early field experiences to teacher candidates, it is a highly time- and labor-intensive endeavor that requires ongoing commitment, collaboration, and resources to maintain.

The AACTE/NCATE Survey on Clinical and Field Experiences

In spite of the complexities and challenges involved, teacher preparation programs across the country provide substantial amounts of early field experiences for teacher candidates in a variety of settings, according to the 1997 Joint Data Collection System (JDCS) Clinical and Field Experience Survey. This survey was an

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addendum to the JDCS, which is conducted annually by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (Huling, Raffeld, & Salinas, 1998). The addendum was completed by 490 (85%) of the institutions that completed and returned the 1997 JDCS Institutional Reports.

According to survey results, the vast majority of teacher candidates first engage in field experiences prior to their junior year in college. A total of 77% of elementary programs and 70% of secondary programs require candidates to first participate in field experiences in PK-12 settings during their first or second year of college. Candidates spend a substantial number of clock hours engaged in early field experiences, although elementary candidates spend more time in field experiences than secondary candidates. At the elementary level, 70% of programs report candidates spending more than 90 clock hours in early field experiences. At the secondary level, 49% of the programs reported candidates spending more than 90 clock hours, while 51% reported that they spend between 16 and 90 clock hours. The difference between the amount of time spent by elementary and secondary candidates is likely related to the fact that elementary teacher preparation programs typically require more credit hours of professional studies and emphasize the teacher as a child development specialist, while secondary preparation programs typically require more credit hours in the major content field and emphasize the teacher as a specialist in a specific academic discipline.

Teacher candidates participate in early field experiences in a variety of schools and classrooms. In elementary preparation programs, 77% of the candidates work in more than one PK-12 setting while 73% of secondary candidates participate in early field experiences in more than one PK-12 setting. Only 14 % of elementary programs and 16% of secondary programs place candidates in only one classroom for early field experiences. In addition to observing, candidates report doing a variety of other tasks during early field experiences. More than 75% of programs reported that both elementary and secondary candidates engage in teacher aide tasks (e.g., grading papers, bulletin boards), tutor individual students, teach small groups of students, and teach the whole class.

More than 90% of programs at both elementary and secondary levels report that university supervisors provide some degree of on-site supervision to candidates. The most common supervision model used in early field experiences is one in which the supervisor makes periodic on-site visits to candidates. This is the case in 89% of elementary programs and 87% of secondary programs. In 7% of the elementary programs and 4% of the secondary programs, supervisors are always on-site when candidates are in PK-12 settings. Most likely, these are the preparation programs that operate in PDSs.

Do Increased Field Experiences Make a Difference?

Common sense alone would indicate that candidates who receive increased amounts of field experience will be better prepared to deal with the complex realities of today's schools, classrooms, and students. For example, principals frequently report that candidates who were prepared in field-based programs perform in their first year of teaching more like second- or third-year teachers. Collectively, the anecdotal reports of candidates, teacher educators, and employers alike confirm the belief that more, and earlier, field experiences result in better prepared teachers. Now, a recent study conducted in Texas (Fleener, 1998) has provided evidence that candidates who receive increased amounts of field experience in their teacher preparation programs remain in the profession at significantly higher rates than those prepared through traditional campus-based programs. Fleener's study included 1,959 elementary teachers produced by three of the state's largest teacher-producing institutions, each of which was in the process of transitioning from traditional teacher preparation programs to field-based programs (Houston & Huling, 1998). About half of candidates in Fleener's study were prepared through newly implemented field-based programs and about half were prepared during the same years by the same institutions through the traditional teacher preparation program. The 1,959 candidates graduated and began their teaching careers in the years of 1993 to 1996. By fall 1996, only 4.8% of those prepared through field-based programs had left the profession compared to 12% of those prepared in traditional programs. These data indicate that field experiences are an important factor in the preparation of teachers and that candidates whose preparation involves increased amounts of field experience remain in the profession through the induction years in greater numbers than those who receive less field experience.

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